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Gold Rush Abroad: The Trajectory of Singapore-Based Thai Transsexual (Male to Female) Sex Workers in Global Sex Tourism

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Sex work is part of Thailand's tourism-based economic development model. The country's global reputation as a 'queer paradise' is an important factor shaping Thailand's sex tourism and linking it to the global sex industry. This paper addresses transnational routes and networks of the global sex trade through Thai transsexual (male to female) sex workers who travel out of the country to Singapore for short periods to meet global demand. The research is based on in-depth interviews with 75 Thai transsexual sex workers who are working in districts such as Orchard Towers, Little India, and Geylang in Singapore. For some informants, Singapore is a final destination; for others, it is just a stop along the way to other places abroad. The findings show that the commercial sex trade involving these individuals is global in every sense, including the way it is funded, developed, structured, and organized.

Keywords: Agents; Sex Tourism; Sex Workers; Singapore; Thai Transsexuals

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INTRODUCTION

Transnational mobility appears to be a way to break away from oppressive local conditions (Limpangog, 2013; Kempadoo, 1998; Kim, 2012). The combination of capital flows, globalization, international sociopolitical changes, and communication technologies has transformed the ability of people to contact, interact, and encounter each other (Schiller, Basch, & Blanc, 1995). This study addresses the trajectory of 75 Singapore-based Thai transsexual (male to female) sex workers. Their decisions are influenced by push factors such as the economic recession and political tensions related to a military coup (2014-2019), and the fact that the 'legal non-acknowledgment' of marginalized identities in Thailand motivates Thai sex workers to travel out of the country. Pull factors include the strong economy of Singapore and the nature of commercial sex in Singapore. In this transnational migration process, a type of broker or agent/agency referred to as "*mae tact*", an established term in the Thai transgender subculture, facilitates the journey and work of transsexual sex workers abroad.

In this paper, the author focuses on two aspects of the sex workers' experience: 1) the movement of Thai transsexual sex workers, in which the role of agents becomes a crucial issue in the global sex trade, and 2) the working

conditions for the commoditization of sex work in the social and cultural context of Singapore. To date, there has been very little academic study of the working conditions of Thai transsexual (male to female) sex workers abroad. This paper shows that sex is not simply being bought and sold in a global market; rather, it reflects global social and economic inequalities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Thailand's Sex Tourism

Thailand has one of Asia's most developed tourism markets, which largely contributes to the country's employment and GDP. The 'Land of Smiles' is known for its hospitality, beautiful beaches, historical places, highland areas, eco-attractions, world-famous cuisine, good infrastructure at reasonable prices, and red-light industry (Cohen, 2008). International visitor numbers have grown rapidly from 15.9 million in 2010 to 38.3 million in 2018 (UNWTO, 2019). According to the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC, 2019), the total contribution of Thailand's travel and tourism to the GDP is 21.6% – although this dynamic development is currently interrupted due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

International sex tourism in Thailand can be traced back to the Vietnam War, when Thailand was visited by U.S. soldiers during their 'rest and recreation' time. During that period, Thailand gained an international reputation as a sex tourism destination (Cohen, 2001; Wathinee & Guest, 1994; Yot, 1992). This phenomenon has produced the modern version of the go-go bar in Thailand (Meyer, 1988). After the end of the Vietnam War and the phase of 'rest and recreation tourism', Thailand launched its first national tourism development plan in 1976, aimed at further supporting and developing tourism regions such as Bangkok, Pattaya, Chiang Mai, and Phuket (Phayakvichien, 2005). During Thailand's economic growth in the 1980s and early 1990s, favorable economic conditions inadvertently supported Thailand's development of entertainment services for gay men, and, at the same time, affirmed the country's global reputation as a queer paradise (Matzner, 2002). In 2014, out of a total of 26.74 million tourists, 11.23 million tourists were men suspected by NGOs to have come to Thailand explicitly to consume sex (Lines, 2015).

While sex work in Thailand boosts the economic and tourism development in the country, there were several instances in which international attention was focused negatively on Thailand's sex industry. One of the first was a *Time* magazine article in 1993 on prostitution, "The skin trade," which included a picture of a Thai bar girl on the front cover, stating that there were two million prostitutes in Thailand (Hornblower, 1993). Soon after the *Time* article, in the *New Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture* (1993), Bangkok was described as "a city known for its Buddhist temples and as a place where there are a lot of prostitutes" ("Thais ban dictionary over", 1993). The government of Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun persuaded the publisher to withdraw the dictionary and amend the entry for Bangkok. Another well-known incident was "a television program on the BBC that identified Thailand as one of the most dangerous tourist destinations. The danger referred to both physical violence and the possibility of contracting AIDS" (Wathinee & Guest,

1994, p. 17). On the one hand, the sex industry is an important attraction and revenue generator for the tourism market, but on the other hand too much focus on sex and prostitution can also have negative impacts on the development of other tourism markets (Wathinee & Guest, 1994, p. 18). Hence, indirect promotion of the sex industry, coupled with public denial of the size of the industry has gone hand-in-hand.

Thailand is often described as a sex tourist destination for heterosexual men but this image has become more diverse due to an increasing number of male and *kathoei*¹ sex workers (Gallagher, 2005; Witchayanee, 2013). In Thailand, transsexuals are often labeled 'lady boys' or *kathoei*. Originally, the term *kathoei* described hermaphrodites, but the word was later broadened to describe transgender, transsexual, and third gender individuals. However, the term *kathoei* does not carry the specifics of sexual subcultures with it (Witchayanee, 2015). *Kathoei* were not perceived to be unusual or bizarre until the Western emphasis on binary sex started to dominate public opinion (Witchayanee, 2013). In old Siam, *kathoei* enjoyed a historical role as popular entertainers: "it does not stretch credulity to see the modern cabaret shows as a continuation and adaptation of older forms of performance" (Totman, 2003, p. 85). Jackson (1995) further speculated that *kathoei* might have historically served as safe sexual outlets for young, unmarried men, and that might be the precedent to their present involvement in sex work.

As stated, *kathoei* might include transgender or transsexual identity. In the present paper, the author uses "transgender" to refer to "anatomically male people who identify as a third gender and live as women but who have not undergone sex reassignment surgery" (Witchayanee & Earth, 2013, p. 197). In contrast, the term "transsexual" implies "an engagement with medical institutions in order to gain access to hormonal and surgical technologies for embodying one's internal identity" (Stryker, 2004). Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS) to change the body to fit the self-image was established in Thailand in 1975 (Prayuth & Preecha, 2004). Aizura (2011) pointed out that Thailand has become one of the main global destinations to obtain vaginoplasty and other cosmetic surgeries. Bangkok is advertised by many surgeons as "the 'Mecca' of transsexual body modification" (Aizura, 2011, p. 144). Although the exact number of transgenders in Thailand is unknown, Winter (2004) writes that "Thailand probably boasts one of the highest incidences of transgenders worldwide" (p. 7). Furthermore, Arunrat, Banwell, Carmichael, Utomo, and Sleight, (2010) note that 2.1% of the Northern Thai male youth whom they studied considered themselves *kathoei*.

The twenty-first century led to a geographical expansion and increasing visibility of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) communities in Asia, while Thailand's capital city Bangkok emerged as the central focus of an expanding network connecting other Asian destinations, such as Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, and the Philippines (Jackson, 2011). Thailand also actively promotes LGBT tourism in the country, e.g. through the goThai.beFree website (<https://www.gothaibefree.com>) launched by the Tourism Authority of Thailand, or the Miss Tiffany's Universe Contest,

1 *Kathoei* now refers almost exclusively to "biological males" who have a transgender identity (Jackson & Sullivan, 2000, p. 4). *Kathoei* are often described in the Thai language as *Sao* (or Phuying) *Praphet Sorng* (a second kind of woman) or *Phet Thi Sam* (the third sex/gender). Unlike the word *Kathoei* (which suggests to some a subset of male), the latter terms portray the male-to-female (MTF) transgender as either a subset of female or an entirely different gender (Winter, 2005, p. 3).

which has been annually held in the city of Pattaya since 1984 to find Thailand's representative to compete for Miss International Queen, the world beauty contest for transgender women. However, many of the transgender people in Thailand work in the sex industry because they often cannot find work in the public or private sector (Slamah, 1998). Since transgenders often cannot easily hide their sexual identity, they regularly suffer employment discrimination in Thailand, and their job opportunities are often constrained to working in roles in hospitality, entertainment, or the sex work industry (UNDP, 2014). Earth (2006) explains that transgender sex workers in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, sell sex both as a way of expressing their sexuality and as a livelihood. Pro-sex work scholar-activists see sex workers not as victims, but as agents who have the right to self-determination. They perceive sex work as a form of labor (Brenman, 2004). This paper shows that Thai transsexual sex workers often value sex work as a good way to earn an income to pay for their gender reassignment surgeries (since the cost of SRS is too expensive for most Thais), to achieve a better standard of living, and to support their family.

Most recently, the internet has added a new dimension in the advertisement of sex and bodies. Sex work and sex videos are increasingly offered online (Billard, 2019). The involvement of *kathoey* in sex work is also reflected in the abundance of pornographic websites featuring Thai 'lady boys' which are predominantly owned and operated by Westerners (Prayuth & Preecha, 2004, p. 1403). The internet has thus allowed clients to order specific individual sex workers to travel to specific destinations to meet global demand.

Push and Pull Factors of Sex Workers' Transnational Mobility

Thai sex workers regularly travel to Singapore, especially during the low season (July–October) when fewer tourists visit Thailand. Furthermore, during the political crisis of 2008, the floods in 2011, the shut-down of Bangkok (2013), and the last a military coup in 2014, fewer European tourists visited Thailand, but Chinese tourist numbers increased. The number of tourists visiting Thailand fell by 6.6% from 2013 to 2014 (from 26.5 million to 24.8 million) because of the kingdom's political tensions (military coup). This generated 1.13 trillion baht or 5.8% less revenue in 2014 compared to the previous year (Turner, 2015). European tourists are generally considered 'high-spending' and 'culturally sensitive' visitors (Richards, 1999). In many cases, they spend more on hotels and other living expenses than other tourists in Thailand. The average European tourist spends about one third more of what an Asian (including Chinese and Japanese) visitor spends while on holiday in Thailand (Thaiwebsites, 2020), which is mainly related to the fact that Europeans have a longer duration of stay in the country.

Since 2014, Thailand has suffered a rare drop in European tourist arrivals. The military government has been trying to boost the number of other tourists by taking steps such as allowing temporary visa-free entry for more nationalities, particularly from China. Consequently, overall tourist arrivals have been increasing: 29.9 million in 2015, 32.6 million in 2016, 35.4 million in 2017, 38.3 million in 2018 (UNWTO, 2017, 2019). This number was expected to reach more than 40 million in 2020 (Association of Thai Travel Agents, 2018), before the outbreak of the Corona pandemic. Over the

last decade, Thailand experienced an increasing influx of non-Western tourism markets, particularly from China (Trupp, 2017). Chinese tourists comprised 28% of all foreign tourists in Thailand in 2018 (“Indian Tourists: New Hope”, 2019). However, the emergence of the “Zero-dollar Tours,”² especially from China, has resulted in greater economic leakages (Tuohy, 2018). Most interviewed transsexual sex workers still strongly rely on European visitors. Consequently, and as a result of limited economic opportunities in their home country, many decided to travel out of Thailand to find more international opportunities. In addition to these economic considerations, political push factors have played an important role in influencing their decisions to move abroad.

Thailand’s LGBT community first attracted local media attention in the 1960s when *kathoei*, *tom*, and *dee* were stereotyped as part of the ‘homosexual problem’ (Martin, Jackson, Mc Lelland, & Yue, 2008). Jackson explains that “social sanctions against gender variant in Thailand do not usually take the official, legal forms found in the West” (Jackson, 1995, cited in Sinnot, 2000, p. 99). It has been argued that Thai society has a reputation for being tolerant and accepting towards its large and vibrant LGBT communities (Winter, 2011). However, Thai Constitutions and laws have not protected the rights of gender/sexual minorities (Yutthana, 2000; Warunee, 2003), with hostility and prejudice, as well as institutionalized discrimination against LGBT communities still being prevalent (UNDP, 2014). Transsexuals are particularly affected by legal issues because the Thai state does not legitimize any gender or sex transition through altering of personal documentation (NHRC, 2008; Warunee, 2003). According to Ojanen (2009), this “legal non-acknowledgment has several consequences” such as being

denied the right to marriage or registered partnership, barred from receiving welfare provisions that are given to heterosexual couples who live together, not treated as couples by taxation authorities (which would lead to tax reductions), denied the right to adoption, and not given rights to the inheritance of wealth created together as a couple (p. 11)

Recent movements in Thailand to protect the rights of sexual minorities have unfortunately met with limited success. These include the campaign, “Lift to touch the sky,” organized by the LIFT foundation in Bangkok. In July 2019, it proposed to the new government of Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha to recognize the sex change operation by allowing transsexuals to change their official title from *mister* to *miss* under Thai law. The foundation handed in 10,000 signatures in support of the campaign to the parliament in August 2019. The movement is led by Jakkaphong Jakrajutatip (nickname Anne), the only billionaire transsexual in Thailand. Furthermore, the opposition party, “The Future Forward Party,” under Party leader Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit has proposed that the new government promotes

2 “The popular package tours—organized by proxy companies with Chinese owners, but registered in Thailand—the way they are managed and financed by Chinese nationals—much of the revenue generated goes back to companies in China, at the expense of local Thai hoteliers and restaurateurs, who receive a much smaller portion of the revenue. The tours also avoid local taxes, depriving the Thai treasury of millions of dollars” (Tuohy, 2018, p. 2).

human dignity, especially by allowing same-sex marriage for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, questioning, intersex (LGBTQI) people in Thailand. Unfortunately, not only have these requests not been responded to by the current government, but also the Constitutional Court of Thailand took the decision (on 21 February, 2020) to dissolve the opposition Future Forward Party and ban its 16 executive members from politics for 10 years, supposedly because the party took an illegal loan from its leader (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Thus, there continues to be a lack of significant progress in Thailand towards respecting basic human rights for sexual minorities.

In addition, *kathoeys* have also experienced implicit and explicit discrimination and stigmatization within educational institutions and the workplace (Prayuth & Preecha, 2004; UNDP, 2014). At the same time “there has been limited progress in taking legal measures against discrimination,” according to Ojanen et al. (2018, p. 3). Some limited progress can be found in The Gender Equality Act of 2015, which makes it illegal to discriminate against a person “due to the fact that the person is male or female or of a different appearance from his/her own sex by birth” (Human Rights Watch, 2015). Some *kathoeys* manage to become successful in business, but many find themselves edged out of mainstream jobs associated with males and into stereotypically female professions. Prejudice often causes them to feel marginalized and ostracized by others, often forcing them into sex work.

While conditions in Thailand in recent years ‘pushed’ sex workers to find their fortunes abroad, ‘pull factors’ attracted them particularly to Singapore. The city-state ranked second as the most globalized economy in the world (Schwab, 2015). Many expatriates work in Singapore since English is an official language, which supports the international working environment. Singapore boasts a competitive, open business environment and says that its working conditions can be a rewarding experience for foreigners. Expatriate presence in Singapore, along with stronger economic conditions, could motivate Thai transsexual sex workers to travel out of Thailand, particularly during the low tourist seasons, to search for potential customers. Migration from Thailand for sex work can therefore be understood as economically motivated (Kitiarsa, 2008).

Despite these incentives, Chan (2020) points out that Thai migrants in Singapore who are construction workers, foreign wives, and sex workers, are not held in high esteem in the city’s capitalist-consumerist society. Moreover, “the Government of Singapore perceives gays and lesbians as people who disgrace the Singaporean norm and punishes male persons found guilty of same-sex sexual activity crime with up to two years prison” (Jutathorn, 2018, p. 28). In principle, sex work is not illegal in Singapore, but various sex work-related activities are criminalized (Xinghui, 2017).

While there are legally operating brothels in Singapore, where the sex workers are regularly given health check-ups and must carry a health card, there are also informal and non-registered sex workers in Singapore. Sex workers in Singapore can be found in a number of venues, including brothels, go-go bars, hostess bars,³ and streets. Some of these venues can be registered as a leisure, or service type of business, which is

3 In hostess bars, customers pay for drinks, and no entrance fees are required for entry. There are no special shows in hostess bars so no training is required for sex-workers. They must teach themselves how to speak English and how to please customers. As in all other cases of sex workers, the more experience they have, the more money they can earn. Customers enjoy more drinking and conversation with sex workers in the hostess bars.

monitored by the government to ensure proper operation. However, the Singaporean Ministry of Home Affairs reports a 40% rise in the number of unlicensed massage parlors in Singapore between 2013 and 2016, and these establishments are often a front for sex work (Xinghui, 2017). Freelance sex workers such as “street sex workers”⁴ (working in an informal and unregulated environment) operate from the streets of popular commercial districts and designated red-light districts such as Orchard Towers, Geylang, and Little India.

METHODOLOGY

The qualitative information presented in this paper is based on observations and in-depth interviews with 75 transsexual sex workers who – during the time of research – were working at Orchard Towers, Little India, and Geylang in Singapore. Data collection was further supported through semi-structured interviews with 3 bar proprietors (who are all Westerners), 5 bar managers (3 Thais and 2 Singaporeans), and 25 customers (20 Westerners and 5 Asians). The sex workers who participated in this study were over 20 years old and have at least one year of experience engaging in sex work. They were encouraged to express their views freely and to talk about their working experience abroad. The respondents had the right to refuse to answer questions or to terminate the interview at any time. A few potential participants withdrew because of time constraints. Almost all the qualitative data was collected sequentially by direct observation, semi-structured interviews, and an in-depth special session of interviews. All names appearing in this paper are pseudonyms to protect the identities of respondents. The research followed the ethical standards of the Ethics Review Board of Rangsit University. Informed consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

First, the author approached Thai transsexual sex workers in Singapore through key informants. Some bar proprietors were Westerners serving as contacts, and a few Thai bar managers were key informants to arrange the interview settings with sex workers, customers, and bar proprietors. Appointments with sex workers were made a few days in advance so that they could arrive early for interviews at their workplaces. Semi-structured interviews with customers were conducted randomly at the bars with assistance from Thai bar managers. An interview guideline was initially used, but more questions were added as the conversations took place. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with bar proprietors and bar managers to get a complete view of commercial sex in Singapore. Second, an observational guide was also used to keep track of the behavior of each informant and the settings of their workplaces.

Last, in-depth interviews were recorded, and notes were taken. For sex workers employed in bars, interviews were conducted ‘off stage’ in the performers’ dressing rooms. Each sitting was approximately one hour with two or three repeat visits with each informant to build rapport and follow up on previous information. For street sex workers, the author made appointments to interview them later in other places such as Thai town, Thai restaurants, coffee shops, and temples. The last meeting included a review of the interview notes by the informant.

4 A common sex worker who walks along the streets to find the customers randomly on their own without middle persons or specific sexual settings. The price for sexual services varies.

The information was analyzed inductively. The narrative analysis was based on “data triangulation” to crosscheck the similarities shared in the three methods in the three places. Data triangulation is a “method of cross-checking data from multiple sources to search for regularities in the research data” (O’Donoghue & Punch, 2003, p. 78). The author applied axial and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1994) of the qualitative data, developing it into categories and themes.

FINDINGS

Background of Participants

This study included 75 transsexual sex worker informants, ranging in age from 25 to 35 years. Most of them received a high school education. Of these transsexuals, 43 work in hostess bars, 22 work in go-go bars, and 10 are street sex workers. The respondents reported that their level of family financial security in Thailand was “low,” and all sent money home on a monthly basis with the average amount of EUR 800 (SGD 1,250)⁵. In Thailand, the minimum wage is about THB 300 per day or EUR 9 (SGD 13), and the average monthly salary of a person with a bachelor’s degree is approximately THB 15,000 baht or EUR 430 (SGD 672). The sex industry offers the potential to attain an income much higher than the average income in Thailand. Therefore, the informants entered the sex trade as routes to a better standard of living and to pay their debts (such as for sex reassignment surgeries and agency fees), rent, and food bills. They stated that they work in the sex industry to support their family income and to ‘buy’ the right to sexual and personal autonomy.

The interviews revealed that respondents face many hardships and prejudices throughout their lives in Thailand, in particular regarding education, travel, marriage, and employment. Many of these problems stem from the fact that transsexuals appear female from the outside (and, indeed, identify fully as females), but are legally male on all official documentation, even after full sex reassignment surgery has been completed. Prejudice often causes them to feel marginalized and ostracized by others, often forcing them to search for other opportunities outside Thailand. The informants travel to Singapore because they have “nothing to lose” to earn a better income in richer countries, and to break away from oppressive local conditions. All the interviewed transsexual sex workers admitted that they lie to their families about their jobs and tell them that they are working in a Thai restaurant, a Thai Spa, or in Thai massage in Singapore. Jib illustrated the situation in Thailand, which influenced her decision to move to Singapore:

In Thailand, the economy is getting worse. Since the coup in 2014, less European tourists visit Thailand. Chinese tourists have been away from Thailand after the Phoenix’s boat disaster in Phuket in 2018. In Pattaya, I see more Arab and Indian tourists around. When my (transsexual) senior friends who are currently working in Singapore asked if I want to come to Singapore for gold rush (*khud thong*). Yeah, why not? (Jib, 22 years old, a transsexual sex worker who worked in Pattaya, currently working in Orchard Tower, 3 May 2019)

⁵ Thai currency which the exchange rate is approximately 1SGD per THB 22.33 and EUR 0.64.

Based on the fieldwork, all informants claimed that their income in Thailand decreased over the past five years. Previously it was not necessary to leave the country, even during the low season. The informants usually criticized Thailand's political and economic instability which 'pushes' them to search for more customers abroad to secure their incomes. They are not confident after Thailand's national election (23 April 2019) that the formerly 'peaceful' situation of the country will return.

Their potential customers in Singapore are European expatriates. Most respondents prefer customers who are Europeans for their generosity while a few like Asians because of their similar appearance. When customers were asked of their opinion of Thai transsexual sex workers in Singapore, one responded:

I'm a member of this bar. I'm close to the bar proprietor who is a Westerner. The bar manager is Thai, she tells me what is new. They organize sex tour arrangements sometimes. I know that this bar rotates sex workers from Thailand. There is a website showing these [trans] women photos/video clip advertisements. It can take a month until they travel here to Singapore after my request. I prefer to change new faces. (Ben, 35 years old, European customer in Singapore, 22 May 2019)

Sexual exploitation comes under many guises, such as mail order, and sex tours arranged through agencies. Respondents have to learn new technologies and computer skills, such as how to use social media, or video clips, as well as the English language to advertise themselves through social media. Accordingly, sex workers travel arrangements to Singapore can be classified into three groups (see Table 1). 10 of the respondents travelled independently, 15 with other friends or a senior group, and the majority of the 50 informants through the facilitation of an informal broker agency (*mae tact*).

Access to the Global Market

Out of the 75 respondents, 62 had experience working abroad before traveling to Singapore, 37 travelled regularly to work in Singapore, and for 38 this was their first time in Singapore. Of these 38, 13 respondents had not worked abroad before. 15 respondents had worked in the Netherlands, 5 worked in Germany, and 5 respondents worked in the UK. Among all the respondents, 37 travel regularly to the Netherlands, and 7 have experience working in both Singapore and the Netherlands. 15 respondents have worked in all these countries before (see Table 1).

This study found a connection between Thai sex workers and Dutch agencies. All of the 75 respondents are complete transsexuals; 40 interviewees have debts from SRS, of which 33 reported that their sex-change surgeries in Thailand were funded by Dutch agencies that employ them as sex workers. These agencies traded off the costs of SRS against their sexual services for a few years in Amsterdam, where some earned money as sex workers under similar conditions as working in Singapore under the agency. After that, they returned to Thailand and worked in sex tourism before moving to Singapore. Of these 40 respondents, seven interviewees reported borrowing money from Thai agencies (*mae tact*) for their medical treatments in Thailand before traveling to Singapore. Full SRS costs approximately EUR 5,334 to

Table 1. The Trajectory of Singapore-Based Thai Transsexual (Male to Female) Sex Workers (n=75)

Travel arrangement	Independent (10)	Friends, senior peer group (15)	<i>mae tact</i> (agency) (50)
Sexual engagement in Singapore			
Street sex workers	10	-	-
Hostess bar	-	13	30
Go-go bar	-	2	20
Working place			
Orchard Towers	2	2	24
Geylang	4	7	10
Little India	4	6	16
Duration in Singapore per visit			
7-14 days	10	-	-
15-30 days	-	15	-
30-90 days	-	-	50
Previous work experience abroad			
No previous work experience	5	3	5
Singapore only	5	5	5
The Netherlands only	-	5	10
Both Singapore & The Netherlands	-	2	5
Germany	-	-	5
UK	-	-	5
All countries above	-	-	15
Preferred customers			
Asians	3	-	-
European	7	15	50
Debt to agency (travelling)			
No	10	5	-
Yes	-	10	50
Debt to agency (SRS)			
No	5	5	25
Yes			
Dutch agency	-	8	25
Thai agency	5	2	-
Experienced violence			
No	5	10	45
Yes	5	5	5
Planned trip			
Singapore	10	10	-
The Netherlands	-	5	35
Germany	-	-	10
UK	-	-	5

Source: own fieldwork, 2019

13,334 (SDG 8,334–20,834), which is out of reach for an average income earner in Thailand. Consequently, many transsexuals are motivated to do sex work to pay for their SRS and other surgeries to look ‘perfect.’ The sex industry offers the potential to earn an income much greater than that of ordinary work, which is why informants are confident that they will be able to repay their debts and earn good money by working as transsexual sex workers abroad.

Mai is a transsexual sex worker who regularly takes some months off from her work in Thailand to work in Singapore through *mae tact*. She was moving to

Amsterdam to earn more money in the European market right after the Singapore trip. According to Mai:

Thai sex workers are quite popular here. I earned EUR 8,000 (12,500 SGD) for two months in Singapore. I'm moving to Amsterdam for more money next month. My Dutch agency has funded me for SRS the last 3 years. I have to work in Amsterdam 3 months a year for 3 years to pay back all my debts. I hope that I can pay my Dutch agency for my last debt next year. European tourists have a reputation for paying well and tipping big. I can't pay back all my debts if I work only in Thailand. There are not so many (European) tourists anymore. (Mai, 25 years old, a transsexual sex worker who worked in Patpong, currently working in Orchard Towers, 5 May 2019)

According to the interviews, most respondents still have debts that force them to earn much more than average. Only 35 interviewees working in Singapore are free from debts for SRS. However, they might have other debts such as traveling costs owed to the 'agency' that facilitated their work in Singapore.

Travel to Singapore: Alone, With Peers or Through *Mae Tact*

This research identified three common ways in which Thai transsexuals travel to Singapore (see Table 1). First, 10 of the 75 respondents travel to Singapore alone and work as street sex workers. This is not a popular method, as it takes greater risks to work in foreign cultures, isolated from support networks of friends and colleagues. Sex workers explained that it is very risky for Thai transsexuals to travel abroad alone and provide sexual services, especially in a country that views trafficking sexual workers as a very serious crime and imposes severe punishments. Of the 10 street sex workers, 2 worked in Orchard Towers, 4 in Geylang, and 4 in Little India. They planned to work in Singapore for 7-14 days and have both European and Asian customers. They considered returning to work in Singapore in the future.

Second, 15 respondents traveled to Singapore through connections made by their senior peer group. Older Thai transsexuals who have successfully traveled abroad may have rich contacts and can put their younger colleagues in touch with the right people. Of these 15 respondents, 13 work in hostess bars (7 in Geylang, and 6 in Little India), and 2 work in a go-go bar in Orchard Towers. These respondents worked for 15-30 days in Singapore on average. Ten of them planned to return to work in Singapore next time, while five wanted to move to the Netherlands.

Third, 50 out of the 75 interviewees, the overall majority, traveled to work in Singapore under "*mae tact*" through an agency. Of these 50 respondents, 30 worked in hostess bars, and 20 worked in go-go bars (24 worked in Orchard Towers, 16 in Little India, and 10 in Geylang). Thereby they sign a contract with an unofficial agency that is responsible for facilitating travel and work abroad. Although this is the most expensive way to get work abroad, it offers the least risk and it is the most popular method for Thai transsexuals to get work outside Thailand. Yet, the informal nature of a *mae tact* agreement brings its own risks as further explained below.

The interviewees who are under "*mae tact*" explained that "*mae tact*" works like an illegal job recruitment agency to help *kathoeys* find sex work abroad. It is usually

arranged through senior *kathoeys* with great working experience abroad, and it can be arranged through an individual person or through an unofficial agency formed by a group of experienced individuals. Senior *kathoeys* have connections with transgender clubs in Amsterdam, which occasionally arrange for many Thai transsexual sex workers to travel from Singapore to work in Amsterdam based on orders made through the internet. The transgender clubs must bring in new sex workers to attract customers. Many returning customers prefer to pick up new sex workers rather than pick the ones they have met before.

The *mae tact* recruitment has links with bars, clubs, pubs, discotheques, and other sexual outlets. Some have connections with Thai officers who encourage the emigration of sex workers, as it is convenient for them if they operate in other countries. The service fee for *mae tact* is approximately EUR 264–2,627 (SGD 411–4,104) depending on the destination country and the included ‘services,’ which may include organizing travel, visa, accommodation contacts, and employment. However, there is no formal contract and not every *mae tact* is honored. Some agencies abuse the system by taking sex workers abroad and abandoning them with no support once the full fee has been received. Getting a reliable *mae tact* is often just a matter of luck as there are no regulation on this business because of its illegal nature. Despite this risk, it was still worth it to the respondents of this research; without the *mae tact*, they would probably have to resort to selling themselves on the streets and therefore risk arrest and possible deportation. The sex workers under the *mae tact* system usually stay in Singapore for about 30 to 90 days per year.

Singapore: The ‘Gold Rush’ of Asia

For some informants, Singapore is the main destination in Asia before they move to Amsterdam, the center of the European market. A flight from Bangkok to Singapore is convenient and takes only about two hours. There are also direct buses from Hat Yai in Southern Thailand to Singapore (taking about 17 hours), and direct trains from Bangkok to Singapore (taking 2 days). Visa exemption or visa-free access allows Thai citizens to stay in Singapore for up to 30 days. Although it is difficult to get a working visa for entry to Singapore, the potential earnings in the country are very high. Nevertheless, there are expenses too, including the rate for getting a *mae tact* to work in Singapore, which is approximately EUR 533–800 (SGD 833–1,250). Despite these expenses, the hardships and the serious punishment for illegitimate sex work, many transsexuals will pay this amount for the chance to earn a potential fortune, turning the *mae tact* into a viable economic prospect.

Interviewees explained how difficult visa negotiations often coincided with troublesome, uneasy political relations between Thailand and Singapore. In the past, when relations were strained, Singapore would agree only to a short stay visa of one week, but because of current positive political relations, visas of one month are the norm. Kae, a 25-year-old transsexual sex worker provided information from her own experience and from some transsexuals she met. She suggested the average income of Thai transsexuals could be around EUR 1,814 (SGD 2,834) for one or two weeks spent working in Singapore. The downsides of this are the possibility of being caught by the police in Singapore for providing sex and even having visiting rights to Singapore

rescinded permanently. Since March 27, 2020, Singapore has, however, closed bars, nightclubs and denied entry or transit through Singapore for all short-term visitors in an effort to contain a sharp rise in coronavirus cases.

Many Thai transsexuals experience difficulties at immigrations, as Singapore is aware of the fact that some Thai transgender enter the country to provide sexual services. This causes many problems, particularly with travelling. The difference between their physical appearance and the information provided in their passport increases the possibility that they are refused entry and even suffer the indignity of anatomical inspections. It is necessary for transsexuals to be able to declare that they have a job for the visa application process. Here the *mae tact* can help through the connections of the experienced bar owners, to provide employment papers confirming jobs such as an 'artist' for the bars. They would then be allowed to work in Singapore for one to three months, which is one of the ways that *mae tact* can help things run more smoothly.

Prakrong, the manager of a transgender club in Orchard Towers (owned by a Westerner) explains that Thai transsexual sex workers are popular as they are 'exotic' to European customers in Singapore. Transsexuals could earn EUR 80-160 (SGD 125-250) for 'fast sex' in Singapore. The cases of transsexuals providing sexual services abroad vary: Some may leave Thailand only once a year to make a considerable amount of money, while others do it regularly, taking a few months off from their work in Thailand to take a contract working abroad.

For example, twenty-one-year-old Bomb trained as a nude model to afford medical treatment for transsexualism. Bomb is a transsexual who travelled to Singapore already three times through *mae tact*, where she earned EUR 1,333 (SGD 2,083) in one week. She explains that tips are less common in Asian societies, so she is also planning to move to the Netherlands:

I'm moving to Amsterdam and the European Market for more money next month. I have never been in the Netherlands before. I have heard from transsexual friends who work there that the environment in the Netherlands is friendly to us [transsexual sex workers] in terms of the legalization of sex work. I've heard that Dutch law allows same-sex marriage and even the right to change the title [from Mr. to Miss] there. (Bomb, 21 years old, a transsexual sex worker who worked in Patpong, currently working in Little India, 1 July 2019)

Based on the fieldwork, most informants were encouraged by their experiences in Singapore to become familiar with English communication and to develop techniques in bargaining a higher price. This might help them in their work in other international destinations. Of the 75 respondents, 20 wished to return to Singapore for the next trip abroad, while 55 were looking further for other opportunities in Europe. Out of these 55, 40 wanted to move to the Netherlands, 10 to Germany, and 5 to the UK (see Table 1), with the Netherlands being a particularly popular destination for Thai sex workers to gain experience abroad due to the legal status of sex work. The respondents believed that Amsterdam is the sex capital of Europe, attracting European tourists for its nightlife. Often the financial aspect attracted these informants to join the gold rush abroad. Furthermore, Thai transsexual sex workers

also reported that they were interested in entering the sex scene in the Netherlands because of anti-discrimination (gender reassignment) regulations in Dutch law.

Experiences of Violations and Insecurity

The bar managers stated that there are various outcomes for Thai transgenders who go for the gold rush abroad. Some trade sex for money and then return to Thailand with a large amount; some are cheated and trafficked as sex slaves, and some marry foreigners by law and settle down. Some, however, are less fortunate and might even return to Thailand with HIV/AIDS, impacting heavily on their health. However, these are not all of the downsides to the job: out of the 75 respondents, 15 were violated by customers. One informant described her experience of being violated as well as her vulnerable status in commercial sex in Singapore:

I do not plan to do this [selling sex] in Singapore longer than 2 weeks. I take a high risk going out with customers. I got beaten by a customer before. I was afraid to inform the police... it might be even worse if the police demand cash or sexual favors in order to turn a blind eye to my activities. I do not know Singaporean law. Life is so stressful here. It was very expensive to go to the hospital. I feel insecure and lonely. I'm just collecting money to build a small house for my parents in rural Thailand. In my village, there are many seniors who have done a gold rush abroad before. I'm counting days to get back home. Nowhere is better than home. (Kwan, 21 years old, a transsexual sex worker who worked in Patpong, currently a street sex worker in Geylang, 15 May 2019)

In the interviews, informants said they are likely to group together in workplaces and rented rooms that are well-known places for Thai transsexual sex workers, mainly for reasons of feeling more secure. The respondents also make use of strong networks and connections to survive in the commercial sex industry in the social and cultural context of Singapore. All informants noted that they received less pay than sex workers from other nationalities in the global market. They reported feeling insecure and lonely, especially when they got sick or had trouble abroad. They also found themselves operating outside of the protection of the labor laws, often in poor and exploitative working conditions, because of their location at 'the margins of the margin.'

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Thailand has become the tourism hub of Southeast Asia, and tourism is one of the country's significant strategies for development. The sex tourism industry is part of these developments (Witchayanee, 2012). Although sex workers are usually thought of as females who are forced to work in the sex industry, a growing number of those marginalized identities who have entered the sex trade voluntarily, began to tell their own, often very different, stories in the present paper. The growth of the sex industry in Thailand is not only an accidental by-product of poverty. Rather, the increase in sex work abroad results from a systematic strategy of economic development where globalization has been accompanied by tourism as the catalysts of growth. While Thailand's national tourism organization, as well as tourism destinations such as

Pattaya, actively promote the image of Thailand as an LGBT paradise, discussions of sexuality in society are still often taboo, and specific laws referring to sexual orientation and gender identity do not exist (UNDP, 2014).

The research found that Thailand's sex tourism has expanded and crossed boundaries because of the transnational mobility of Thai transsexual sex workers around the globe. This is the result of various push factors: first, a downturn in the Thai economy because of the military government and related decline of certain tourism source markets; second, the high cost of SRS; third, the lack of legal recognition of transsexual identities in Thailand; and, fourth, social stigma of sexual minorities in Thailand. Pull factors that attract Thai transsexual sex workers to travel to Singapore are: first, the opportunity for a higher income; second, the geographic proximity to and accessibility from Thailand; and, third, the legalization of sex work in Singapore in certain areas, which allows established, though informal, agencies/networks to arrange Thai sex workers to work in Singapore. However, there are also a range of constraints of working conditions in Singapore, such as problems with immigration, the need for an agency to arrange personal contacts to work, and the threat of trafficking, as well as the risk of sexually transmitted diseases, exploitation, and abuse.

This paper also showed that transsexuals face many problems, particularly with travelling. Thereby, agencies and the *mae tact* system can play a significant role in funding SRS, traveling fees, employment papers, bar arrangements, advertisement websites, mail orders, sex tour arrangements, and even security and protection. Based on the fieldwork data, Thai transsexuals usually travel to Singapore through an agency-broker support, which allows them to be employed in bars for up to three months and protects them from being violated by customers. This paper found that most respondents had experience working abroad before traveling to Singapore. Many respondents have debts for SRS, which is mainly funded by Dutch agencies before they travel out of Thailand. Therefore, they are willing to take risks to perform sex work abroad to break away from oppressive economic and socio-political conditions in the country, and to search for financial gain, either for themselves or for the well-being of their families. Street sex workers, who usually travel alone, take higher risks than sex workers who are employed by bars, as the former are isolated from support networks of bar owners and colleagues. However, it is costly to pay agency fees, which significantly reduce a sex worker's income and force them to provide more services than they would otherwise deem necessary.

On the face of it, it seems that the majority of Thai transsexual worker choose to work abroad in search of other opportunities. Nevertheless, this study finds that they are often tied into unwanted arrangements and debt. This kind of treatment has also been classified as "at least a type of forced labor and at worst could be classed as slavery, illegal under international law" (Human Rights Watch World Report, 1995, p. 213). Despite their willingness to work as sex workers, the conditions to which they are subjected should not be ignored. Most of the respondents still look for other opportunities in Europe, especially countries that recognize sex work and legitimize any gender or sex transition by altering personal documentation, such as, for example, the Netherlands. Given these complexities, understanding the relationships between the flow of sex workers, sex work, and sex tourism under the context of 'legal and voluntary work' is still problematic.

Race, gender, class, and sexuality intersect within the global sex industry in many ways and produce economic inequalities. Differences in race and ethnicity are seen as ‘exotic,’ at least from the perspective of customers who at times demand ‘exotic’ sex workers, specifically given that most customers (who consume sex work) and most bar proprietors are reported to be Westerners. This phenomenon goes beyond purely sexual desires. The marketplace is not driven simply by sex being bought and sold; rather, it is also the result of a widening imbalance of power in race, class, and gender involved in the global sex trade – one that must be explored further in the future.



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